



# Hannibal Bridge

It was July 3rd, 1869. A crowd of 40,000 elbowed their way onto the banks of the Missouri to celebrate the dedication of a politically empowering marvel — the Hannibal Bridge, the first railroad bridge across the Missouri River. Perhaps more than any other historical event, this moment catapulted Kansas City from a backwoods frontier town to a lively metropolis.

The river's shifting bottom and strong current proved to be a daunting challenge for Octave Chanute, a renowned bridge engineer. The bridge spanned nearly a quarter mile across the Missouri and rested on seven deep-sunk, concrete piers. Its million dollar price tag (in 1869 dollars) included a pivoting drawbridge for steamboat passage.

Celebrations for the opening of the bridge brought many people to the waterfront. The bridge was adorned in patriotic red, white, and blue. A Main Street jeweler watched from a hot air balloon overhead. A cornet band led a parade. And fireworks flashed in the sky as the citizens cheered. When the first train rolled across the bridge, "not a jar or vibration was perceptible."

Photographs courtesy of Missouri Valley Special Collections, Kansas City Public Library, Kansas City, Missouri.



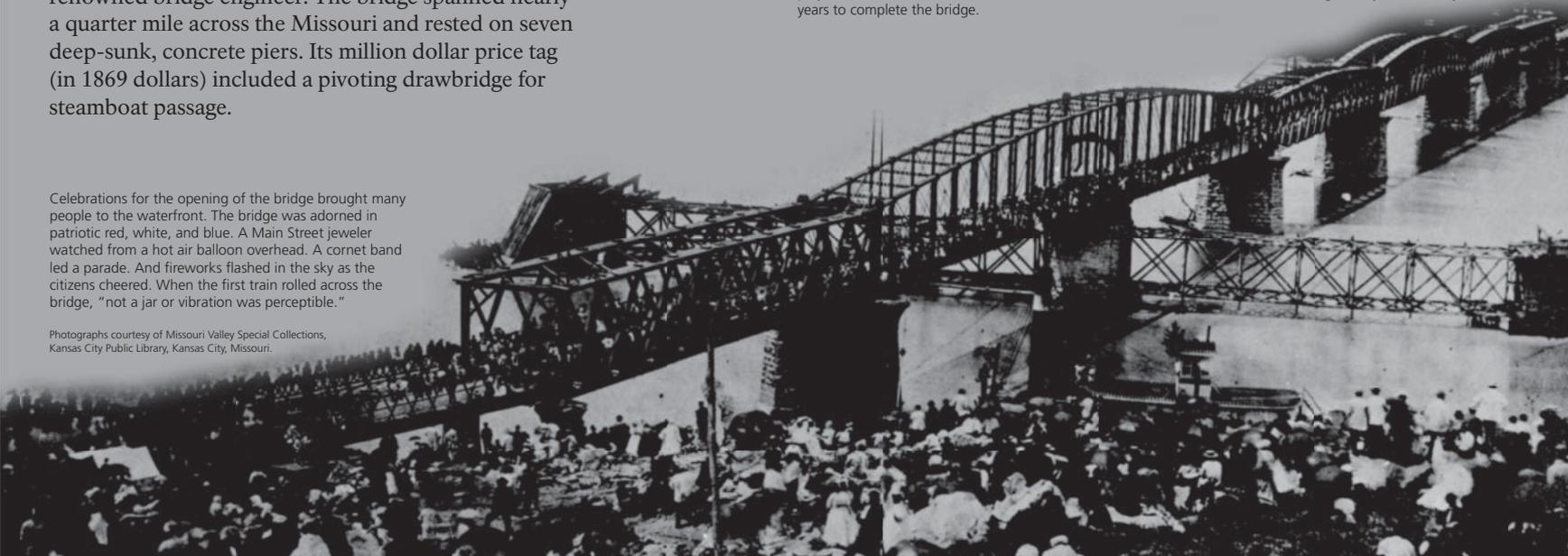
Numerous design challenges faced Chanute and the builders, including high steamboat traffic. They had to bring in manpower from distant locations for this large project. It took two and a half years to complete the bridge.



Divers faced formidable challenges laying the bridge piers. Several men lost their lives from the "bends" — caused when divers come to the surface too quickly.



The Hannibal Bridge survived damage from storms and several tornados in its 48 year history. In 1917 it was replaced about 200 feet upstream by the railroad bridge that you see today.





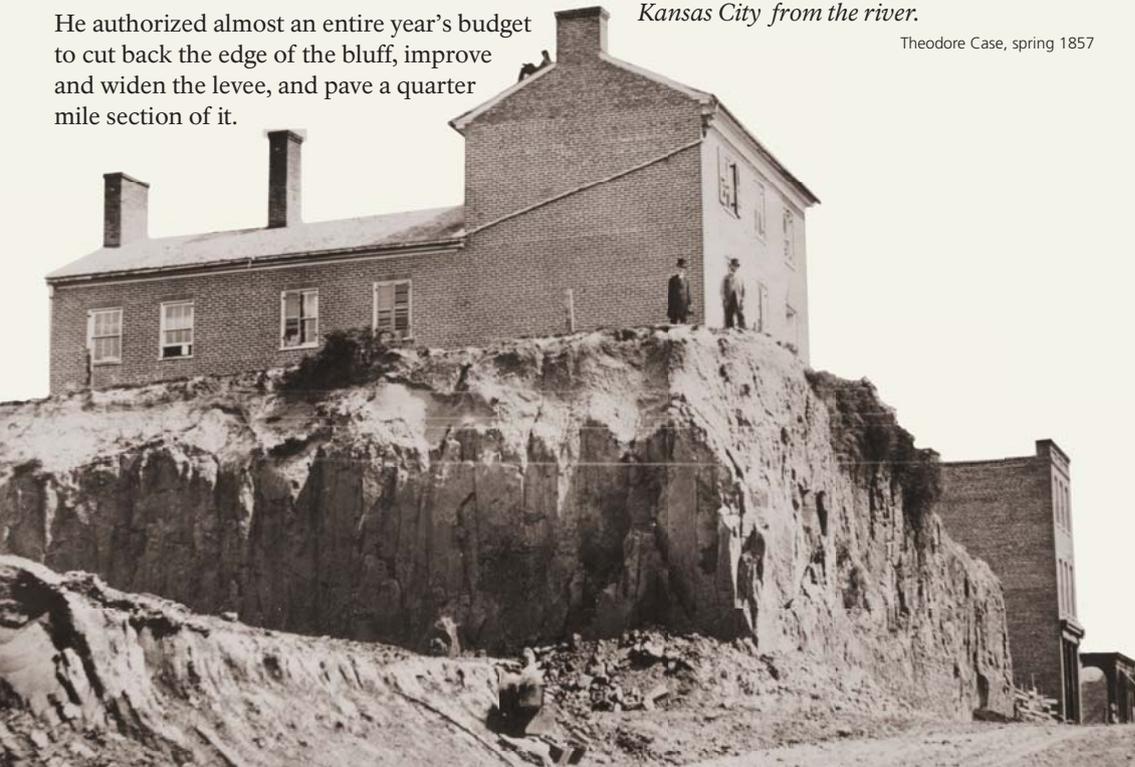
# Building Through the Bluffs

When Kansas City Mayor Milton Payne took office in 1855 he faced an immediate and formidable task: to make his city accessible by cutting streets south from the Missouri River through the looming bluffs along the riverbank.

He authorized almost an entire year's budget to cut back the edge of the bluff, improve and widen the levee, and pave a quarter mile section of it.

*Main street was open though at an exhorbitant angle. All along the whole levee the Bluffs showed. . . far above the tops of the highest buildings & 'Jimpson' weeds, Dog fennel & old gnarled trees with three or four houses interspersed were all that were to be seen of Kansas City from the river.*

Theodore Case, spring 1857



## Kansas City's First Public Works Project



Irish laborers armed only with picks and shovels accomplished much of the backbreaking work.

Workers carved 45 feet of rocky earth from the bluff along Walnut Street and used that earth to fill deep gullies elsewhere in the city.



In 1858 and 1859 newspaper ads in Eastern newspapers sought additional Irish labor from Boston and New York, and finally, the first rough streets — Delaware, Walnut, Main, and Market — rudimentary as they were, cut through the bluffs.

The Main Street engineering feat was featured in *Beyond the Mississippi*, by Albert D. Richardson, 1867.



By the 1870s machinery and blasting powder supplemented the sweat of manual labor, and the city had its streets.

The towering riverfront bluffs, an obstruction to the city's founders, had finally been subdued, reduced, and civilized.



## Chez les Canzes

# The French at Westport Landing

French fur trappers and explorers were the first Europeans to arrive at the junction of the Kansas and Missouri rivers.

French military officer Etienne Veniard led an early expedition up the Missouri River. Though he wasn't the first Frenchman here, his journal entry dated July 11, 1713, provides the earliest written description of the area.

*... on the west side a range of hills – towards the west northwest ... one finds the River of the Canzes, which mouth comes from the south ...*

Westport founder John McCoy remarked that French trader François Chouteau's land was "... one of the largest and best farms in the county, with a steamboat landing, warehouses, and costly dwellings, and out-houses..." Chouteau's family and friends were instrumental in the growth of Westport Landing into Kansas City, Missouri.

Plan of Westport Landing, 1840, by Nicholas Point.  
 This survey of the area labels the properties held by 26 French Catholic families.



## A French Family in Kansas City

The Chouteau family was the preeminent French founding family of the Kansas City area. In 1790, Auguste Chouteau was given trade rights with the Kansa Indians. By 1818, his sons had a successful fur trading post known as 'Four Houses' on the Kansas River.



This French church sat on the bluff and was sketched by Nicholas Point when he traveled through here in the early 19th century. Notable individuals who also passed through Chouteau's Landing include John Fremont, Kit Carson, and John James Audubon.

Successfully settled into the area, they expanded with a second post a few miles east of here. After a flood in 1826, François rebuilt on higher ground only one mile east of here. He managed Chouteau's Landing until his death in 1838.

Another flood wiped out the post in 1844. His wife Berenice moved up onto the bluffs of Kansas City. Feted as the grand dame of Kansas City, she lived out her life there until 1888.



# Gilliss House Hotel

The stone wall that still exists today against the bluff between Delaware and Wyandotte streets is the remains of the once-famous Gilliss House Hotel. Built around 1850, the lively riverfront hotel went by various names including the Union, American, Eldridge, and finally the Gilliss House Hotel.

During the Border War era, 1854 to 1860, the hotel was a hotbed of intrigue as it changed hands between pro-slavery and abolitionist proprietors. Throughout the 1880s it was the main, and eventually the only, hotel here on the Missouri riverfront. Over the years many prominent frontiersmen, including Kit Carson, stayed in this first-rate inn before journeying out onto the plains or returning east via steamboat.

When Kansas City's businesses and growing population spread south of the river, the riverfront became less desirable and the hotel's popularity dropped. The Gilliss House fortune declined, and the hotel's heyday was over. Soon the lowly old building would become a pickle factory. And finally, in the 1920s, the long-standing structure burned to the ground.

Photograph courtesy of the Missouri Valley Special Collections, Kansas City Public Library, Kansas City, Missouri.

*I write you from a point which is getting to be more and more a favorite resort for those engaged in the Santa Fe trade. . .It has the advantage of an excellent landing, accessible at all stages of the river, and is only four or five miles from the "Plains", with which it is connected by a road that, already good, is constantly improving. The Traders seem well pleased with the treatment they receive here.*

A guest of the hotel, *Kansas Public Ledger*, 1851





# The Countrey...very fine

## Lewis and Clark at the Kansas River

Meriwether Lewis and William Clark embarked on their legendary voyage to the Pacific West in May of 1804, traveling up the Missouri River and arriving in this vicinity on June 26. They camped for three nights at Kaw Point, one mile west of here at the mouth of the Kansas River. They also stopped here on their return on September 15, 1806.

*...assended a hill which appeared to have a Commanding Situation for a fort, the Shore is bold and rocky immediately at the foot of the hill, from the top of the hill you have a perfect Command of the river.*

Clark's journal, September 15, 1806

### Lewis and Clark at Kaw Point

June 26, 1804

Heading to the Pacific West

- Camped for three nights at the mouth of the Kansas River
- Built a six-foot high redoubt (a temporary fortification) made of logs and brush
- Dried and repaired their equipment
- Explored the surrounding area for several miles

September 15, 1806

Returning from the Pacific West

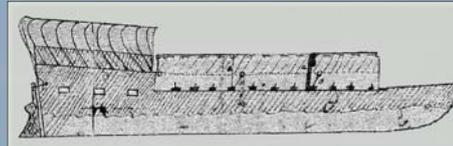
- Returned south rapidly in dug-out boats to St. Louis
- Stopped to rest and gather paw paws at the river bank
- The two leaders climbed the bluff to review the area

Activities listed in the expedition's journal in 1804 and 1806.

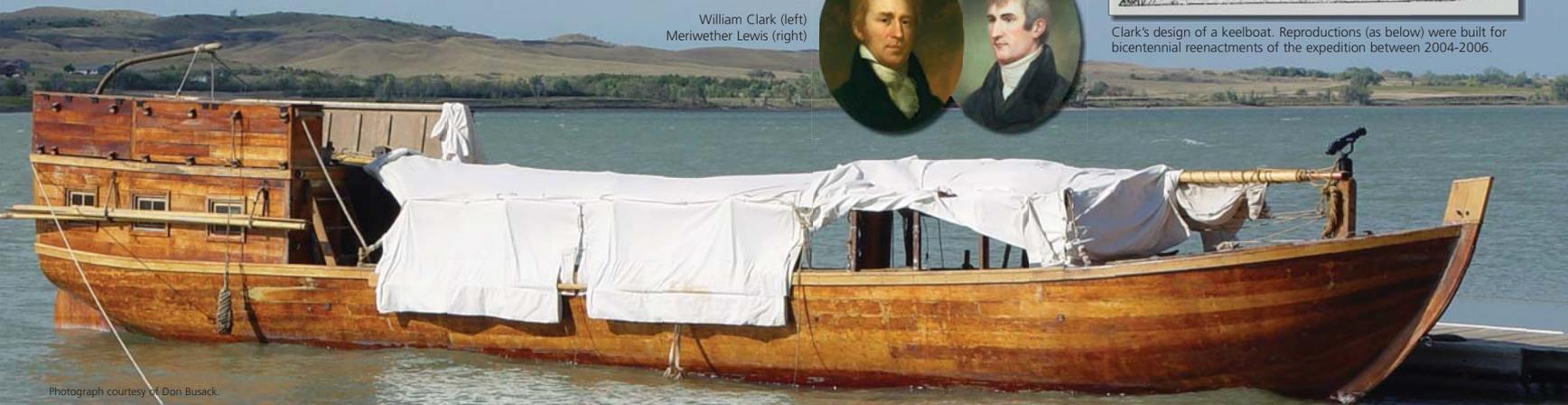
William Clark (left)  
 Meriwether Lewis (right)



Visit Kaw Point Park to Learn More about Lewis and Clark



Clark's design of a keelboat. Reproductions (as below) were built for bicentennial reenactments of the expedition between 2004-2006.





# A Real McCoy - Dreamer, Settler, Founding Father

In 1833, an bright young surveyor named John Calvin McCoy built a two-story log trading post in the hills four miles south of the Missouri River. McCoy's business became the lively trading and outfitting center of Westport for traders, fur trappers, Indians, and emigrants heading west on the Santa Fe, Oregon, and California trails.



John C. McCoy, founder of both Westport and the town of Kansas, lived out the remainder of his life here in the city he loved: the great city that emerged from the humble beginnings of small frontier villages, Kansas City.



McCoy recalled that in the 1830s "we worked our way down the small valley...cut a wagon way through the dense brush to reach the goods, and loaded the first consignment of merchandise ever landed at the port of Kansas City."

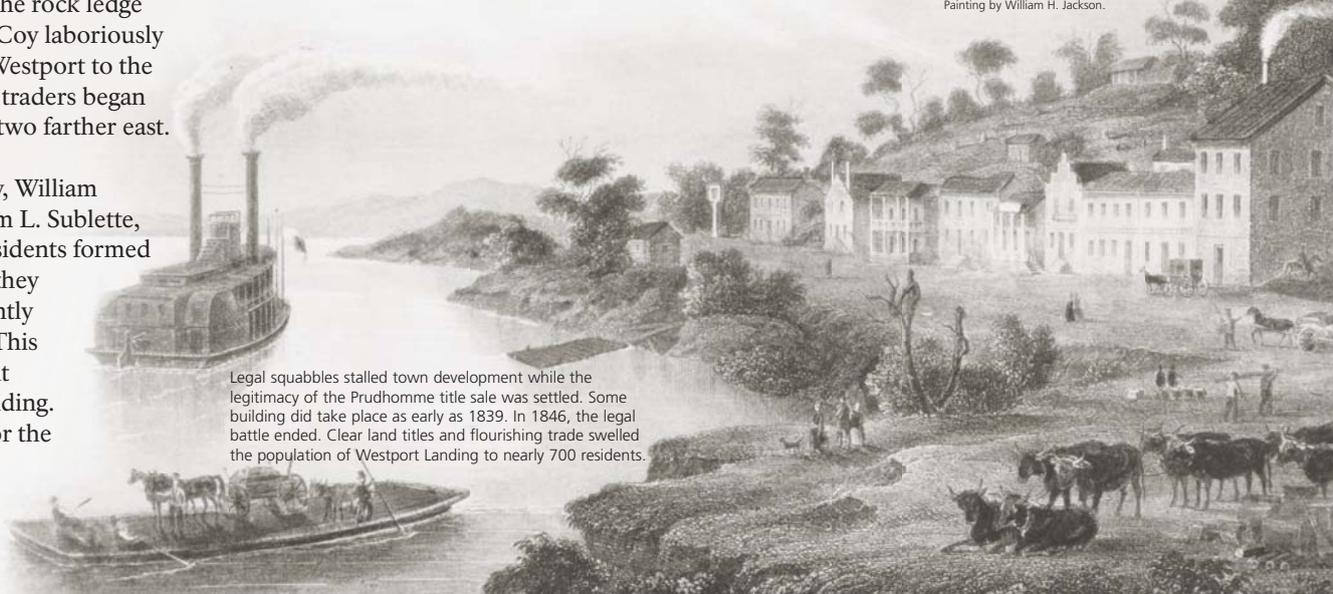


Santa Fe Trail traders and suppliers used Westport Landing to connect the town and trail with the world. It was soon preferred over two other landings farther east — Independence landing, 12 miles downstream, and Blue Mills landing, about 18 miles east. Painting by William H. Jackson.

McCoy also discovered a rocky outcrop on the south shore of the river —an ideal natural landing for river boats. In the spring of 1834 he cut a primitive path from his store to the rock ledge you are standing over today. McCoy laboriously improved the rough road from Westport to the river, and by the 1840s, Santa Fe traders began to favor Westport Landing over two farther east.

In November 1838, John McCoy, William M. Chick, mountain man William L. Sublette, and 11 other Jackson County residents formed the Town Company. For \$4,220 they purchased the estate of the recently deceased Gabriel Prudhomme. This 257-acre tract of prime riverfront property included Westport Landing. McCoy platted about 15 acres for the town and the company agreed to call it Kansas.

Images courtesy of Missouri Valley Special Collections, Kansas City Public Library, Kansas City, Missouri, and NPS/Scotts Bluff National Monument.



Legal squabbles stalled town development while the legitimacy of the Prudhomme title sale was settled. Some building did take place as early as 1839. In 1846, the legal battle ended. Clear land titles and flourishing trade swelled the population of Westport Landing to nearly 700 residents.



# From Steamboat Landing to City

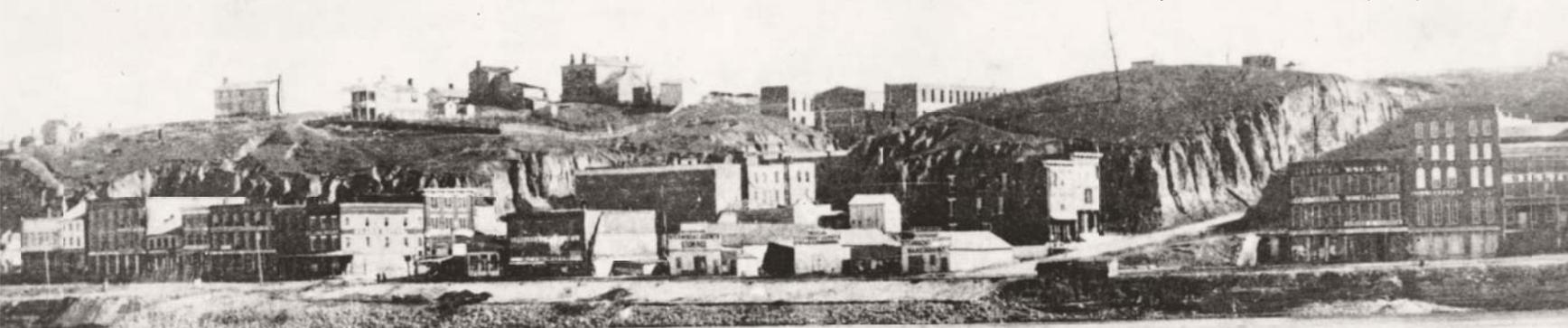
The town was only a spark in 1834 when entrepreneur and tradesman John Calvin McCoy cut a primitive path from his store to a prominent rock ledge on the river – a perfect landing for riverboats. The steamboat *John Hancock*, laden with goods for McCoy, was the first to dock at Westport Landing. In the same year, McCoy laid out lots around his store four miles south of the river and named it Westport.

Commerce prospered during the Mexican War (1846 to 1848) with increased Santa Fe, Oregon, and California trade. The California gold rush of 1848 brought thousands of emigrants rushing west to the Pacific coast via Westport Landing and the town of Kansas. By 1849 the town included “some eight or ten stores, several blacksmith’s shops, a gunsmith’s shop, wagon maker’s shop, three hotels, &c.&c.”

On February 23, 1853, the town of Kansas officially became the City of Kansas based on the charter received by the Missouri Legislature. Two years later, workers began to cut back the towering bluffs along the river and widen the levee. By 1855 the town was thriving with a bright and promising future. The town changed its name to Kansas City in 1889.

# 1838-1855

In 1838, McCoy and 13 other Jackson County residents formed the self-styled Town Company. For \$4,220, they purchased a 257-acre tract of prime riverfront property that included the up and coming Westport Landing. McCoy platted 15 acres for the town and the company agreed to call it Kansas. Legal squabbles stalled development for eight years, but they cleared up in 1846 and a new survey made investment and development possible.





# Waterfront Town to Metropolis

By May of 1854 the air was already electrified by the sizzling-hot debate of pro-slavery versus anti-slavery when Congress passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Now, the western territory was open and available, and whoever settled Kansas first would determine its status as a free or slave state. A new, frenzied wave of migration began. City of Kansas residents were acutely affected. Missouri was a slave state and most residents held a pro-South bias.

The addition of another free state on the Missouri border posed a threat. But the City of Kansas, with both its popular steamboat landing and its unsurpassed access to the new territory, held an economic advantage as this historic turn of events began to unfold. By 1880 the bluffs had been cut into streets, the city ran several miles south of the river, the population was over 50,000, and the city was on its way to becoming a metropolis.

# 1856-1880

An idyllic scene of the City of Kansas from the opposite side of the river.

Illustrations and photographs courtesy of Missouri Valley Special Collections, Kansas City Public Library, Kansas City, Missouri.



City Market at 3rd and Grand Streets in Kansas City, a few blocks from the river, with the open air market on the east side and the store fronts on the west side, ca. 1870.

## Which Scene Do You See?

Despite the idyllic river scene on the left, hordes of people were rushed up the Missouri River during the contentious 1850s. They crowded the steamboat landing before passing through the city bluffs and scurrying to establish their physical presence and to influence which party — pro-slavery or abolitionist — would prevail. By 1855 the flood of immigrants dramatically swelled the population of the little City of Kansas. In a two-year period, 1855-1857, the Gilliss House Hotel reported 27,000 new arrivals.

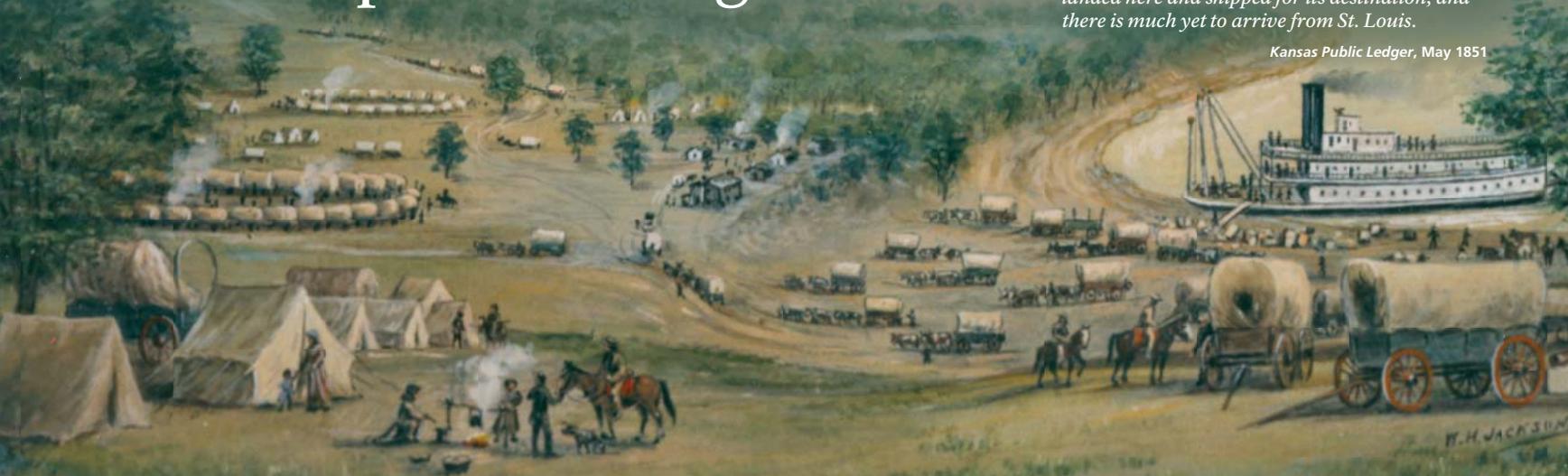
*In front of the town the broad bouldered landing sloping down to the water's edge presented a confusing picture of immense piles of freight, horse, ox, and mule teams receiving merchandise from the steamer, scores of immigrants wagons, and a busy crowd of whites, Indians, half-breeds....Carts and horses wallowed in the deep excavations; and the houses stood trembling on the verge as if in fear of tumbling down.*

Albert Richardson, spring 1857

# Three Trails from Westport Landing

*We presume not less than 300 wagons have left Kansas this spring for the Plains, most of which have gone to Santa Fe...The trade between this point and N.M. is rapidly increasing. Already not less than 1,500,000 lbs. of freight for that country has been landed here and shipped for its destination, and there is much yet to arrive from St. Louis.*

*Kansas Public Ledger, May 1851*



Since 1821, traders on the Santa Fe Trail had brought their goods by steamboat as far up the Missouri River as possible before departing on foot and wagon for Santa Fe. Landings continued to move farther and farther west along the river and by the late 1830s Santa Fe traders disembarked here at Westport Landing – just before the river’s northward bend.

Thousands of Oregon-bound emigrants and California gold seekers also disembarked here before going west. Leaving Westport, travelers heading to Santa Fe, Oregon, and California followed the same trail until they crossed the state line and split off at the trail junction west of present-day Gardner, Kansas.

Westport Landing remained the primary jumping-off point for trade and emigration until the outbreak of the Civil War, when trail traffic moved north to Leavenworth. Before long, the landing, which had borne the weight of freight and emigrant dreams, became obsolete.

All three trails have been designated as National Historic Trails by Congress. Learn more about the National Trails System and these three trails at [www.nps.gov/nts](http://www.nps.gov/nts)